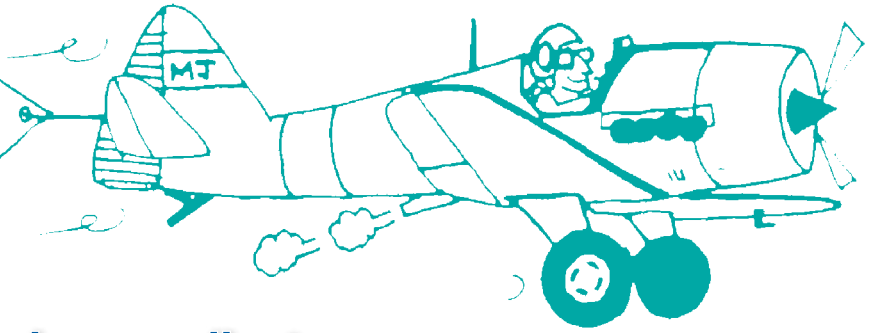


# Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



## Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recollects...

### Bonding with Bhopal

The black-and-white, grainy photograph, rubber-stamped 'Bhopal Studio' and ink-dated 16/6/1896 (yes, 122 years ago!) showed a stiffly posed family of a serious looking man, his wife seated with her sari-pallu almost covering her face and their two young daughters. One of the girls is my paternal grandmother (Dadi), born in Bhopal and who passed away in Bhillai in 1979. This ancient photograph, locked in her trunk but shown to me on more than one occasion, was the sole recollection she had of her family as both her parents died in an epidemic soon after it was taken. The sisters were taken over and educated by missionaries in the Central Provinces/Madhya Pradesh. In the late 1920s both sisters, along with their families, settled in adjacent homes in the tiny village of Jyotipur (Chhatisgarh) on the road to Amarkantak, the source of the River Narmada whose waters reach Bhopal. This then is my tenuous, ancestral connection to Bhopal which, till very recently, I had never visited.

Last year, on his return from an assignment abroad, our son was posted by his company to Bhopal; my wife and I were happy to accept an invitation to visit in December 2017. Ever since my retirement from the air force 32 years ago, our travels have been primarily by air. The air connection from Hyderabad to Bhopal was however at an inconvenient departure time, hence we opted for a train journey after almost a decade. In the event we quite enjoyed the 14-hour rail journey by the Rajdhani made more pleasant by the company of a very friendly and helpful young couple who shared our compartment and were most caring for their octogenarian travel companions.

On Christmas Day in Bhopal, we attended service at a small church looked after by a priest with the very unlikely name of (hold your breath) Padre James Bond. Unlike his famous and flamboyant

namesake, our onomastic 'desi 007' is a quiet, simple, serious padre who hails from Tirunelveli down south, fluent in Tamil, Hindi, English and who has served in Tamil Nadu, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In his current assignment he ministers to the spiritual needs of fewer than 20 families from a church that barely seats 75 people. When I gently teased and quizzed him about his famed name, he was neither 'shaken nor stirred' but happily posed for a photograph before returning to his pastoral duties.

We found the New Bhopal to be a very pleasant city with well-planned, wide tree-lined roads, open green spaces and lakes that dot the countryside. Its malls and restaurants were as good as any we have elsewhere with lighter road traffic and not a policeman in sight. We were able to meet up with another retired air veteran after a gap of a quarter century. On the evening before we returned, we had an unexpected visit from relatives in Rajasthan who just happened to be visiting Bhopal. Among them was the daughter of a cousin of mine, who, after marriage, had settled in Bhopal over two decades ago. She was pleasantly

surprised to learn that, unwittingly, she continues our family bonding with Bhopal.

### Farokh: Flier, Friend and Author

On 27 February, 2018, Wing Commander Farokh Jehangir Mehta, VrC (Retd), marked his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday. Last year, he published his memoirs titled "Biff the 'Z' out of Can't". His family, friends and admirers assembled at the Sailing Club in Secunderabad for a book-reading followed by a birthday lunch for him and his guests. As a tribute to our close personal and professional relationship Farokh gave me the privilege of writing the Foreword which, reproduced below, will give the reader an overview:

The title of this book says as much about the author as its contents. Farokh Jehangir Mehta, a first time author, chose to commence penning his memoirs at the ripe old age of eighty by narrating ninety-four evocative episodes in his life in three phases. The first phase (1931-1954) covers his early years, the second (1955-1979) his air force service, and the third (1980 onwards) his post-retirement period. This fascinating



*The faithful Hunter of yore*

collection of stories takes the reader from a privileged childhood in the erstwhile State of Hyderabad, through Independence and service as a fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force in peace and war, to his successful entrepreneurship and creative retirement. Farokh Mehta is a true-blue Hyderabadi, at home in both the Urdu language and Islamic culture. I have had the privilege of knowing the author as a friend and erstwhile air force colleague for nearly half a century. His style of writing mirrors his personality. His story will have great interest, not only for those who wore uniform, but also for a much larger readership on both sides of the Indo-Pak border.

The book-reading was done by members of *The Little Theatre Hyderabad*, which includes this writer. The selected pieces were thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated by the audience. Despite the difference in our ages (Farokh is nearly two years my senior) while I was his commanding officer, our personal friendship was never affected. In fact we have some surprisingly similar experiences in our lives too. Both of us flew the Hunter aircraft for many years and served as Flight Commanders in the same squadron (No. 20); both of us commanded Hunter squadrons (he No. 27, me No. 20); both of us ferried Hunter aircraft from UK to India; both of us earned gallantry awards in the 1971 Indo-Pak war; both of us had a near-death experience – he in the lowest possible ejection from a Hunter Mk.66D on 19 December 1970 and me a successful manual bail-out from a blazing Tempest IIA on 28 October 1952; both of us took premature retirement from the air force and, in our 80s, both of us published books that recorded our experiences as ‘episodes’ in his and as ‘anecdotes’ in mine. On the family

side both of us are blessed with a son and a daughter; both daughters are married and settled abroad while both sons are in India. In retirement, seldom was a function held in either of our homes that did not include the other couple.

For those readers who would be interested in reading more about this aviator and author, do get in touch with Naozar (80088 25050) or Padma (92468 77555).

### Cricket in the Forties

Some of us from my generation (which predates *Midnight's Children* by 15 years) are still around and are quite *au fait* with our national obsession i.e. cricket. My younger grandson, a natural all-round sportsman, once asked me, ‘Dada, did you ever play cricket?’ I assured him that indeed I had, but 70 years ago! Being a teenager, this time span of seven decades was almost beyond his comprehension, so I shared the story with him.

During World War II (1939-45) our boarding school in Bihar, along with its extensive playing fields, was taken over and converted into a major British military hospital. We were relocated to a city in UP for four years (1943-46). At Independence we returned to find a large number of new buildings on our erstwhile playing grounds leaving just one field for hockey, football and athletics in their seasons. Post demobilisation after the war, some British armed forces personnel chose to stay on in India. Among them was a couple; the lady was a qualified nurse who joined our school staff as the Matron. Her husband, an ex-Sergeant from what he termed as the ‘PBI’, (Poor Bloody Infantry), was appointed as our Games and Sports Master.

*Sarge*, as he was known to all of us was very popular (not only for his earthy language) but for a very likeable, friendly and helpful personality. Unknown to us however was the fact that he was an extremely keen and experienced cricketer. He set up ‘nets’ in this (for him) ‘corner of a foreign field’, acquired cricketing gear and taught us the rules of the game and skills required for batting, bowling, fielding and umpiring fairly. Under his guidance we improved our team work, leadership attributes and other character building qualities. If any of us ever hesitated at the crease over a perceived doubtful LBW decision, he strode down the pitch, pointed to our makeshift pavilion and proclaimed imperiously, ‘Mr...we walk!’. (Our subsequent private mimicry of his accent/action generated many laughs for us, but we did learn the meaning of discipline – an attribute I needed in great measure in my air force years). Other games were not neglected but all of us seniors (1947-48) practiced hard to make it into our very first ever school cricket XI.

In our final year, we played our first inter-school cricket match watched by our faculty, their families, guests and (most popular of all) the senior girls from our girls school...of course ‘Cheerleaders’ were still in the distant future! We won that match narrowly and *Sarge* was the toast of the school. In my college there was no cricket and I switched over to tennis which I enjoyed playing till about three years ago. In the air force, cricket was confined to just a few centres which did not cover any of the fighter air bases where we young pilots spent our formative years. I do however recollect at least two air force cricketers who were called up for the national team.

Cricket as we knew it, has of course changed over the years, as much else has, in our lifetime. In 2004, in my early 70s, I was invited by my old school to be the Chief Guest at its Platinum Jubilee celebrations. I was given a tour of the school buildings by the Head Boy and was amazed at the transition of our school from less than 100 boarders in my time to one that accommodates 1850! Seeing no playing fields, I asked him about games. His response was, ‘Yes Sir, cricket is very popular; we have TVs in all our Common Rooms and are allowed to watch outside class hours’. I instantly decided to say nothing about cricket in the 40s; am certain *Sarge* would have approved – as did my grandson!



India's national obsession